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THE HISTORICAL RECORDS
OF THE
SCANDINAVIANS IN AMERICA

BY

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THE HISTORICAL RECORDS OF THE SCANDINAVIANS IN AMERICA

In recent years a considerable amount of scholarly research has been carried on in the field of the history of the Scandinavian element in the United States. An illuminating illustration of the opportunities open to the scientific historian is afforded in Dr. John O. Evjen's recently published book, *Scandinavian Immigrants in New York, 1630-1674*. That this field has been but little cultivated need scarcely be pointed out. Topics important as well as attractive await the attention of the investigator. Indeed, it may safely be asserted that a great deal of carefully prepared monographic literature must be produced before a definitive general treatment of the subject can be written. The industrial or economic history of a specific group of Scandinavians, or of that element as a whole, in the Northwest, or in a single state of the Northwest; a study of their political influence, similarly restricted in scope; an investigation of some of the ramifications of the process of amalgamation, perhaps particularly in the direction of church affiliation or religious tendencies; various aspects of their church history; biographies of leaders in diverse fields of activity; studies placing emphasis upon social and general cultural factors in the development of Scandinavian life in the United States; the problem of the significance of the Scandinavians in the American westward movement: all these topics serve merely to suggest profitable subjects for monographic study.

An undertaking necessarily preliminary to such research is the comprehensive collecting of the materials for the history of the Scandinavian element. In fact, this may well be regarded as a matter of far more immediate importance than

intensive research. Would it not be wise to attempt to assemble at some central depository the rich sources which at present are scattered throughout the Northwest and elsewhere? Not a little of this material is now located in the libraries of numerous denominational colleges; much of it is to be found in private collections. Some of it, fortunately, is accessible to students and is well cared for by persons who realize its historical value. But it is to be feared that a far greater amount—particularly of manuscript materials, collections of letters, diaries, and other valuable papers—is in the possession of persons having little or no appreciation of its significance, and is consequently neglected and in serious danger of destruction from disintegration, fire, and other causes. The immigration is on the whole comparatively recent. Much valuable source material is therefore contemporary or nearly so, and in many cases it is difficult to draw any clear cut line between primary and secondary materials. Important chapters in the fascinating story of the Scandinavians in the new world, of their dissemination throughout the country, of their social, political, economic, and religious life, will ultimately have to be reconstructed from the kind of materials now largely neglected. The permanent loss of these precious records would prove a calamity no less unnecessary than historically unfortunate. In this connection, the story of a journal written by one of the early leaders in the movement of immigration to America is of interest. When Ansten Nattestad left Illinois in 1838 on a journey to Norway via New Orleans and Liverpool, he carried with him the manuscripts of Ole Rynning's famous "America Book" and Ole Nattestad's account of his observations and experiences. Both of these were published in Norway as small books and had a considerable influence upon emigration in the following years. For many years scholars have been searching for a copy of Nattestad's book. Nattestad himself lived to be an old man, and it appears that in the Eighties he gave to the editor of *Skandinaven* a manuscript copy of his book which he had preserved. Shortly thereafter

the editor's home was destroyed by fire, and with it the manuscript. In 1900 two sons of Ole Nattestad located a printed copy while on a visit to Norway. In January, 1916, this copy was secured by Mr. Halvor L. Skavlem, who turned it over to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. As Ole Nattestad was the first Norwegian settler in the state of Wisconsin this was fitting. Moreover it is most fortunate that the book will now be permanently preserved, since, so far as is known, it is the only copy in existence. The title will at once indicate its great interest as a document of the early immigration: *Beskrivelse over en Reise til Nordamerika, begyndt den 8de April 1837 og skrevet paa Skibet Hilda samt siden fortsat paa Reisen op igjennem de Forenede Stater i Nordamerika, af Ole Knudsen Nattestad fra Nummedal (Drammen, 1839. 31 p.).*

The loss of this book would probably have been irretrievable. Beyond question there are hundreds of other documents, printed or manuscript, which will be lost permanently if no organized effort is made to insure their preservation. They may not have the peculiar significance that the Nattestad pamphlet possessed, but may, however, have real value. Is it not a proper time to agree upon some well formulated, comprehensive plan for the care of these sources? The problem involves more than the gathering up of materials in imminent danger of loss or destruction. The student who undertakes serious study in the field of Scandinavian-American history is confronted with the perplexing task of utilizing sources which are scattered about in dozens of places, many of them difficult to reach, few of them centrally located. This has acted, naturally, as a deterrent upon scholars attracted by the subject matter and has likewise proved a cause of incomplete and unauthoritative work. Moreover it is well-nigh impossible to ascertain precisely what may be found in the various depositories, a condition due not merely to an absence of published lists or descriptions of materials, but also to a lack of adequate cataloguing. A more serious defect in the present system,

however, is that few of the small libraries have adequate vaults or fireproof rooms in which to preserve their collections, and it must be remembered that much of this material can not be duplicated. This of course holds true more especially of manuscripts. Finally, the small college libraries are usually handicapped by a lack of financial resources and of library equipment.

The solution of the problem is to centralize these Scandinavian materials in some depository which gives assurance of being a permanent institution and which has the resources necessary to an extensive effort in accumulating a great collection of printed and manuscript documents, and to an adequate and scientific care of the materials which it secures. It must arrange the manuscripts, repair and restore the damaged and indistinct papers, carefully index them, publish bibliographies, descriptive lists, and calendars. Furthermore, under competent editorial direction it must undertake the publishing of important manuscripts in its possession. It must above all be centrally located in order to allow extensive utilization of its collections by students and investigators.

The great bulk of the Scandinavian population in the United States is in the Northwest, and the Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, form the heart of this region. Here are centered many of the agencies—religious, social, and industrial—which embrace in their scope the great mass of Scandinavians in America. Here gather most of the great annual conventions of their organizations. Here, too, are situated not only the University of Minnesota, but a number of the more important Scandinavian denominational colleges. In many respects Minneapolis and Saint Paul may be considered the cultural center of these people in the United States. Not long ago Dr. Vincent as president of the University of Minnesota declared his intention of striving to make that institution the center for Scandinavian study in this country, a proposal which elicited wide spread endorsement among educators. By its activity as well as its location the university may be considered

in a fair way to accomplish its expressed purpose in this respect. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the Twin Cities should logically be the Mecca of historical investigators in this field, and that, all things considered, here is a proper place to build up a great, permanent library of the records of the Scandinavians in America.

The Minnesota Historical Society, situated in Saint Paul, has recently made a declaration of policy which gives promise of a successful solution of the problem. As a state historical society this institution has fittingly specialized in the collecting of materials relating to the history of the Northwest, and particularly the state of Minnesota. During the period since its founding—soon seventy years—the society has grown to be one of the greatest institutions of its kind in the United States. A magnificent and commodious fireproof building, costing in the neighborhood of a half a million dollars, has just been erected by the state for the purposes of the society. In 1915 the superintendent of the society declared that the institution would bend its efforts toward the building up of a great library of Scandinavian materials. This, in his opinion, is an undertaking peculiarly appropriate for the Minnesota Historical Society, because of the significant part played by Scandinavians in the history of Minnesota and of the Northwest. Just as it is proposed to make the university a great center for the study of the Scandinavian countries, their languages and literatures, so it is intended to make the society a center for the study of the Scandinavians in this country. The society has proceeded vigorously to carry out its policy. Already the recipient of the principal newspapers and periodicals published by the Scandinavians in the United States, it has begun the task of collecting files of old papers and magazines, reports of religious organizations and educational institutions, as well as books, pamphlets, and manuscripts. An arrangement has been effected with the University of Minnesota whereby the latter is to cultivate the field of the Scandinavian countries, languages, and literatures, and turn over

to the society its materials on the Scandinavians in this country. As a consequence of this arrangement the society has acquired the extensive O. N. Nelson collection of periodicals, newspapers, books, and pamphlets. Formerly one of the most comprehensive private collections of its kind, this has now been arranged and catalogued, and forms the nucleus of what, it is hoped, will become a special library unparalleled in America. Other important acquisitions, both printed and manuscript, have been made, and the materials will ultimately be put in charge of a trained librarian familiar with the Scandinavian languages and with the history of the Scandinavians in this country.

The success of this undertaking must depend largely upon the degree of coöperation accorded it by individuals and organizations having at heart the preservation of these records. No less noble and thrilling than the story of the Puritan fathers is this history of the vast wave of Scandinavian immigration to the West. The environment in the old world, the eventful voyage to the new, the dissemination throughout the continent, the breaking of ground, the building of homes and churches, the beginning of educational activity, the establishment of a position in labor and industry, the gradual entrance into American life in all its multiform phases: these are elements in an epic half untold, glorious in its recital of achievement, and full of inspiring lessons. Surely we can not do less than preserve for posterity the extant records of this great movement. Let us adopt a mature plan, based upon sound, scientific principles, and thus insure for future generations the priceless treasures of the past and the present.

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